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ABSTRACT

In outdoor education, reflection transforms experience into knowledge. Writing activities facilitate reflection. In designing writing activities, instructors should ask themselves why they are asking their students to write, what type of writing is appropriate for their purpose, when and in what context the activity should take place, how they want students to complete the assignment, what audience students should address, and how the instructor will respond to what students write. Six writing activities appropriate for outdoor education are discussed. Journal writing asks students to express their feelings at a given moment; record what they see, hear, smell, and touch; and probe the emotional and intellectual significance of their responses to the experience. Freewriting is helpful for insecure writers and breaks the habit of editing while writing. Freewriting should not be graded. Descriptions help students capture and reflect on sensory experiences. Literary responses broaden student understanding of an experience by viewing it through another's eyes. Letter writing serves as a record of experiences and an impetus to reflection. The more formal process of essay writing carries perception and understanding deeper than the other activities. Essay writing is most effective when essays are intended for an audience. (Contains 13 references) (TD)

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Writing Activities: A Primer for Outdoor Educators

Alan Brew

In *Experiential Learning*, D. A. Kolb (1983) defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38), and he identifies "reflective observation" as one of four important steps in the transformative process. Writing activities are one means of facilitating reflection and learning because, as Easley (1989) explains, the process of writing "is active in the sense that it requires a re-creation of an experience on paper and reflective in that it requires a conscious search for meaning . . ." (p. 11). This Digest summarizes a procedure for designing writing activities, and it describes six activities appropriate for outdoor education curricula: journals, freewriting, descriptions, literary responses, letters, and essays.

Designing Writing Activities

Composition specialists agree that effective writing activities are planned in advance and integrated with experiences (Lindemann, 2001). To facilitate the development of such activities, instructors might begin by asking themselves a series of questions:

- *Why am I asking my students to write?* (to prepare for a discussion? to reinforce the teaching of a skill? to encourage reflection?)
- *What type of writing is appropriate for my purpose?* (freewriting? journaling?)
- *Given my purpose, when should I ask students to complete the assignment?* (after a specific experience? at intervals during the experience? at the end of the experience?)
- *How do I want the students to complete the assignment?* (on their own? in groups? in a single sitting? in stages?)
- *For whom will the students be writing?* (themselves? members of the class? me?)
- *How, if at all, will I respond to what the students write?* (in a discussion? with written comments? with a grade?)

Having answered these questions, the next step is to prepare a description of the writing activity for the students. This description should communicate concisely and in language familiar to the students the purpose, form, and audience for their writing during the activity. Although it is tempting, especially in the field, to present these assignments verbally, Lindemann (2001) emphasizes the importance of providing written directions, which students can review throughout the writing process.

Planning and communicating writing activities in this manner assures that they will be integrated fully into an experience and that they will contribute to the process of transforming experiences into knowledge.

Journals

Keeping a *journal*, which shares linguistic roots with *journey*, is an activity that may be integrated into outdoor experiences in multiple ways. As Murray (1995) explains in *The Sierra Club Nature Writing Handbook*, a journal can be a mechanism for recording and organizing experience, a tool for processing events as they occur, and an "unflinching mirror" that reminds individuals "of the importance of eliminating self-deception and half-truths in thought and writing" (p. 3).

Often, however, students have preconceived notions about journals. Some associate them with private diaries; others are intimidated by the journal's formality, feeling that they must write in an elevated style and record profound thoughts. Broadening students' conceptions of a journal frees them to use their journals as working notebooks, where they may collect thoughts, observations, and even objects. Petersen (2001, pp. 39-50) offers a helpful description of different journal types and approaches to keeping them in *Writing Naturally*.

In general, journaling activities ask students to do the following: (1) express their feelings at a given moment; (2) record what they see, hear, smell, and touch; or (3) probe the emotional and intellectual significance of their responses to readings, landscapes, people, and experiences. Specific suggestions for journaling activities may be found in a number of recent books. Of particular note are Hinchman's (1991, 1997) *A Life in Hand* and *A Trail Through Leaves*; Leslie and Roth's (2000) *Keeping a Nature Journal*; and the works by Murray and Petersen cited above. Raffan and Barrett's (1989) essay "Sharing the Path: Reflections on Journals from an Expedition" offers an analytical study of the role that journals might play in an outdoor experience.

Freewriting

Freewriting, like journaling, often leads to realizations about an individual's experiences. It is also a helpful activity for insecure writers. Promoted by Elbow (1973) in *Writing Without Teachers*, freewriting can undo "the ingrained habit of editing at the same time you are trying to produce" (p. 6). As Elbow explains, most individuals edit what they perceive to be unacceptable as they write. Freewriting allows these thoughts to appear and be acknowledged.

The activity is a simple one: Students write for a

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"designated period of time about anything that comes into their minds. During this time, they should write continuously; they should write in sentences, rather than lists or phrases; and they should not correct or revise. After completing a freewriting session, students can select a sentence or idea from what they produced and use it as a prompt for a second session, thus focusing their unconscious exploration of an idea. Or, students might share what they have written in a discussion. However the writings are used, they should not be graded. Students must be confident that what they write will not be judged.

Further suggestions for facilitating freewriting activities may be found in Elbow (1973) and in Tallmadge's (1999) essay "Writing as a Window into Nature."

Descriptions

If freewriting helps students express unconscious or repressed thoughts, then descriptions help them capture and reflect on sensory experiences. As Hinchman (1997) observes of Henry David Thoreau, "In finding words that marry experience and response, he knows the deepest pleasure of the writer. Without the words, he's looking at the surface; in finding the words he immerses himself" (p. 125).

Typically, these activities require students to describe their surroundings. Hinchman (1997), for instance, asks her students to keep "cloud logs," updating them hourly from dawn until nightfall (p. 130). Tallmadge (1999) encourages students to refine their observations of color by asking them to describe the sky, which requires them to consider not only hue but also texture, sheen, and density. In longer courses, students might visit a specific geographic location over time, describing what they experience at different times of day or seasons.

Description activities do not, however, need to be limited to observations of nature. Students might describe the behaviors of other participants in the course or, if skill development is a component of the course, how to start a fire with flint and steel.

Literary Responses

This activity introduces the perceptions of others into the writing process by asking students to read what others have written about experiences similar to theirs. These readings broaden the students' understandings of an experience because they help students see the experience through the eyes of another.

Written responses to the readings facilitate reflection by providing a starting point. For instance, students may not know how to begin processing their personal experiences of a wilderness canoe trip, but reading an essay by Sigurd Olson gives them something to respond to. Thus, a student might write, "The emotions that Olson describes are not the emotions I felt, but I did feel. . . ." Another benefit of these activities is that the writing of others gives students models, providing words or structures that help them capture their own experiences.

Letter Writing

Like a journal, letters can serve as a record of experience and as an impetus to reflection. A common letter-writing activity requires a student to compose a letter to him or herself near the end of an experience. These letters are collected by the instructor and mailed to the participant six months after the course. As D. C. Kolb (1988) observes in "Letters from the Past," these letters serve as effective vehicles for follow-up in a variety of situations.

Other letter-writing activities ask students to compose letters to future participants in a course or to their parents. Foster, Biernat, and Wheeler (1985) provide an overview of these and other activities in "Letter Writing for Outdoor Education."

Essays

Essays are more formal than the other activities described in this Digest, but they also have a unique benefit. As Tallmadge (1999) explains, ". . . the discipline, concentration, and attention required to produce a finished story or essay carry perception and understanding deeper than is possible through journal entries or freewritings alone" (p. 24).

These assignments are most effective when they are presented as an opportunity for students to formulate their ideas for presentation to an audience. Asking students to follow specific length and format guidelines heightens the sense of formality, as does publishing the essays in some manner, whether in a self-published course reader, institutional newsletter, or even a professional journal.

Conclusion

In the field of outdoor education, instructors understand that reflection is an important step in the process that transforms experiences into knowledge. When writing activities are carefully planned and integrated with outdoor experiences, they become an effective and efficient means of facilitating reflection in a variety of circumstances and at various stages during an experience.

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